

# The South African Defence Force versus SWAPO And Its Allies: Operation Askari, 1983-1984<sup>1</sup>

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## *Abstract*

Die Suid-Afrikaanse Weermag (SAW) en die Suid-Afrikaanse Polisie (SAP) was betrokke in militêre konflik met die bevrydingsbewegings vir die volle duur van die sogenaamde grensoorlog aan die noordelike grens van Suidwes-Afrika (Namibië). Die South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO, gestig in 1960) het hom beywer vir die bevryding van die gebied via militêre aksies teen die Suid-Afrikaanse magte. Vir hierdie doel is 'n militêre vleuel, die People's Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN), gestig. Internasionale gebeure het daartoe bygedra dat die geveg om Suidwes-Afrika nie slegs tot SWAPO en die Suid-Afrikaanse magte beperk was nie. As gevolg van 'n coup d'état en die ekonomiese en morele las wat die kolonies meegebring het, het Portugal inderhaas in 1974 uit Angola en Mosambiek onttrek. SWAPO, met die ondersteuning van die MPLA, het militêre basisse in die suide van Angola gevestig, sodat hulle Suidwes-Afrika meer effektief van daar af kon binnedring. Dit was slegs 'n kwessie van tyd voordat die Suid-Afrikaanse magte nie slegs met SWAPO te doen gekry het nie, maar ook met die MPLA en die Kubaanse magte. Suid-Afrika het egter nie 'n houding ingeneem van wag en sien nie, maar wou die inisiatief behou, hoofsaaklik deur middel van sogenaamde transgrensoperasies. Tussen 6 en 27 Januarie 1976 is nie minder nie as 35 Suid-Afrikaanse burgermagineenhede opgeroep om deel te neem aan Operasie Savannah, die eerste van vele oorgrensoperasies wat sou volg. Die algemene doel van hierdie operasies was om 'n effektiewe teenvoeter te wees vir die insydeling van SWAPO in Suidwes-Afrika vanuit die suide van Angola. In hierdie artikel word die botsings tussen SWAPO en sy bondgenote aan die

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<sup>1</sup> The author's request, dated 16 April 2004, for access to the records of Operation Askari in the Documentation Centre of the South African National Defence Force, was confirmed on 30 April 2004. The letter of confirmation stated: "The Department of Defence is presently in the process of searching for the relevant records that may possibly be available. Please note that the records that you have requested are still classified and will therefore be submitted to the Defence Intelligence Division for scrutinizing purposes and possible declassification or masking of certain information. Please note that this is a laborious process." *The author has not heard anything in this regard since.*

een kant en die SAW aan die ander kant krities bespreek. Die fokus sal wees op die mislukte pogings van die SAW om die SWAPO/MPLA/Kubaanse vestings in Cahama, Mulondo en Cuvelai in suidelike Angola tydens Operasie Askari (1983-1984) te verower.

### ***Introduction***

International events contributed to the situation that the struggle for South West Africa was not limited to SWAPO and the South African forces. Because of, among others, a coup and the economic and moral burden associated with overseas colonies, Portugal withdrew in haste from Angola and Mozambique in 1974, leaving the former colonies in chaos. In Angola the three liberation movements, namely the MPLA, FNLA and UNITA got involved in a military struggle against one another. The Cold War was already in full swing at that stage and the USSR and its Cuban ally provided the Marxist MPLA (and its military wing FAPLA) with weapons and financial aid. Starting April 1975, Cuba even went as far as to send thousands of troops to Angola to assist the MPLA. At first the other liberation movements did not receive aid, but for strategic reasons (such as preventing the establishment of a communist state on the northern border of South West Africa), South Africa, with the moral support of the USA, started giving military and financial support to UNITA, who was sympathetic towards the West.<sup>2</sup>

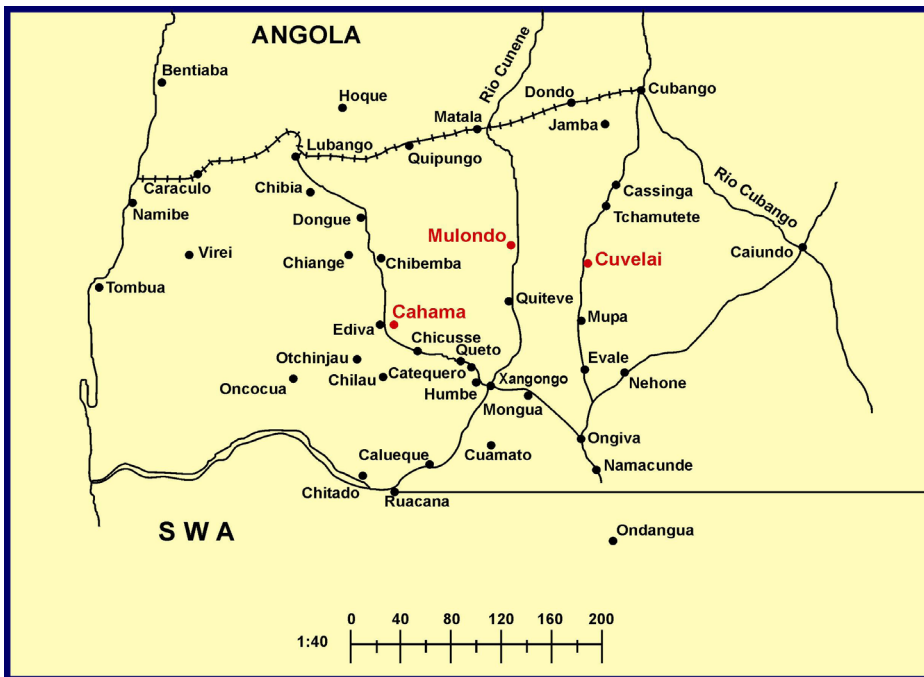
SWAPO, supported by the MPLA established military bases in the south of Angola in order to penetrate South West Africa more effectively. Consequently it was only a matter of time before the South African forces would encounter not only SWAPO, but also the MPLA and Cuban forces. South Africa did not adopt an attitude of wait-and-see, but was determined to maintain the initiative through their so-called pre-emptive operations. Operation Savannah (1975-1976) was the first of many cross-border operations to come.

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2 HJ van Aswegen, *Geskiedenis van Afrika van die vroegste oorspronge tot onafhanklikheid*. (Pretoria, Academica, 1982), pp. 481-484; L. Barnard, *Pantser in aksie: 1 SDB 1933 - 1993*, p. 52; L. Scholtz, *Beroemde Suid-Afrikaanse krygsmanne* (Cape Town, Rubicon Press, 1984), pp. 177-178; W. Steenkamp, *Borderstrike!: South Africa into Angola* (Durban, Butterworths, 1983), p. 3.

### *Objectives of Operation Askari, 1983-1984*

SWAPO planned a massive infiltration of Namibia by about 1 000 members of its special unit during the early rainy season of December 1983 to January 1984. One group was to move through Cahama into Kaokoland and western Ovamboland; the second group from Mabala through Mulondo and Quitete into central Ovambo and then in smaller groups to Outjo, Otavi, Tsumeb and Grootfontein; and the third group were to infiltrate from Cuvelai to eastern Ovamboland and then in smaller groups to Tsumeb and the Kavango.<sup>3</sup>



Angola: 5 Military Region<sup>4</sup>

The general objective of Operation Askari was therefore to effectively counteract SWAPO's infiltration of South West Africa from the south of Angola. Accordingly it was decided that the enemy should not only be attacked locally, but also across the border (Angola). Cahama, Cuvelai and Mulondo therefore had to be isolated, exhausted and terrorised so that FAPLA would either withdraw or desert on a large scale. SWAPO then had

3 *The Windhoek Advertiser*, 16 January 1984, p. 7; M Norval, *Death in the desert: the Namibian tragedy* (Selous Foundation Press, Washington, 1989), p. 170.

4 Source: RS Lord, "Operation Askari (a sub-commander's retrospective view of the operation)", *Militaria* 22/4, 1992, p. 2.

to be dealt the maximum losses – structures also had to be destroyed in the process.<sup>5</sup>

## ***The Battles of Cahama and Mulondo***

### **Cahama**

SWAPO's Headquarters (HQ) near Lubango (300 km from the Namibian northern border) was the first target to be hit by the SAAF in early December 1983. This was heard at Cahama and vicinity, where the 2nd Brigade of FAPLA was stationed. South African reconnaissance units also discovered an advanced SWAPO HQ just west of the town of Cahama, manned by approximately 200 men. Its function was to direct the infiltration efforts from its advanced position. The first land attack of Operation Askari was therefore directed at this HQ and on 6 December 1983 mounted infantry units of the SADF and SWATF advanced towards Cahama. The SWAPO soldiers abandoned their HQ and fled into Cahama, where they enjoyed the protection of FAPLA and Cuban forces stationed there.<sup>6</sup>

The 2nd Brigade of FAPLA and members of SWAPO had entrenched themselves in fortified positions in and around Cahama. Various probes by the South African ground forces and attacks by the SAAF in previous years had not succeeded in dislodging FAPLA/SWAPO or “even denting the peripheral defences”.<sup>7</sup> On 20 December 1983 a combat team bypassed Cahama to the east and executed a feint toward Chimbemba to test the enemy's reaction. Since Chimbemba was regarded by SWAPO as a stepping stone for an attack on their operational HQ at Lubango, they reacted strongly to the South African feint. They launched an armoured column consisting of T54 tanks and armoured personnel carriers to deal with the threat. A fierce fight broke out and resulted in both sides grinding to a stalemate.<sup>8</sup>

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5 Regiment Moorivier Archive (ARMR), Potchefstroom, File 63: *Bevelvoerder Sektor 10, Op Plan: Op Askari (Sektor 10/309/1 Op Askari, 23 September 1983; ARMR, Potchefstroom, File 63: Artillerieregimentsbevelvoerder, Art Opso no 1/83: Op Askari - Fase 2 van Sek 10 Gevegsontwerp, 27 November 1983.*

6 *The Windhoek Advertiser*, 16 January 1984, p. 7.

7 M Norval, *Death in the desert: the Namibian tragedy* (Selous Foundation Press, Washington, 1989), p. 175; RS Lord, “Operation Askari (a sub-commander's retrospective view of the operation)”, *Militaria* 22/4, 1992, p.4.

8 M Norval, *Death in the desert: the Namibian tragedy*, p. 176; *Die Suidwester*, 20 Januarie 1984, p. 5.

The South African 61 Battalion and artillery elements were to put pressure on Cahama via probes, feints and artillery bombardments, while the SAAF had to carry out strikes against identified targets. These actions were aimed at demoralising FAPLA/SWAPO to such an extent that they withdraw from or desert Cahama. Brigadier RS Lord labelled this *modus operandi* as “naive planning in the extreme... a Brigade garrison, which in their view had successfully beaten off the ‘boere’ repeatedly, would not be disturbed by the activities of two small recce teams.”

The real battle of Cahama started during the middle of December 1983 with the advance of 61 Mechanised Battalion from the already captured Quiteve. This approach was met by fierce resistance and when South Africa had to withdraw from Angola towards the end of December 1983 due to international pressure, all activities on the Cahama front was ceased. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of FAPLA and members of SWAPO had once again successfully beaten off a determined onslaught of the “boere”.<sup>9</sup> The South Africans therefore did not achieve their objective of launching such an onslaught on the enemy that they would flee. To the contrary, the South Africans were the losers in that battle. International pressure to withdraw, the fact that the enemy were entrenched in positions, naive planning and the deceptively dense bush of the flat terrain could be regarded as contributing factors.<sup>10</sup>

## **Mulondo**

The general aim regarding Mulondo corresponded closely with that of Cahama: to intimidate or exhaust the enemy to such a degree that they would flee. The SAAF carried out speculative bombing in and around Mulondo against selected targets. The purpose of this action was to heighten the tension prior to the final assault by the ground forces. FAPLA's 19<sup>th</sup> Brigade sent out their recce teams to protect their front. They succeeded in establishing the actual positions of the South African combat group to such an extent that whenever the South Africans moved their artillery into range, they bombarded their positions with D-30 canons. The latter outdistanced the firing range of the South African artillery by approximately 4 km. The

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9 RS Lord, “Operation Askari (a sub-commander’s retrospective view of the operation)”, *Militaria* 22/4, 1992, pp. 4-5; *Die Suidwester*, 20 Januarie 1984, p. 5.

10 ARMR, Potchefstroom, File 140: *Bevelvoerder Veggroep Delta, Staande orders Veggroep Delta*, undated, p. 2; ARMR, Potchefstroom, File 204: *Die Silwer Arend*, vol. 4, no. 2, November 1984.

South African forces therefore could fire only a few salvos and then had to withdraw in a hurry. Since 23 December various air strikes were undertaken by the SAAF. These were in vain, because the South Africans could not succeed in forcing the FAPLA/SWAPO forces to flee from Mulondo. The “boere” also lost this round against FAPLA/SWAPO forces.<sup>11</sup>

### ***Combat Group Delta and the Battle of CUVELAI***

The general aims of Ops Cuvelai were to isolate and intimidate FAPLA and SWAPO to such an extent that they would flee, and also to carry out operations against SWAPO elements (for example Moscow Battalion) in the Cuvelai area. The SAAF had to undertake speculative bombing of FAPLA and SWAPO targets.<sup>12</sup>

Combat Group Delta, responsible for the ground attack on Cuvelai, was under command of Regiment Mooirivier Headquarters, with Commandant SG Greyling in command. The fighting capacity of Combat Group Delta on 11 December 1983 was a total of 1 055 men (76 officers and 979 warrant officers and privates).<sup>13</sup>

Cuvelai, situated 195 km north of the South West African border, housed SWAPO’s HQ and the 11<sup>th</sup> FAPLA Brigade. The Bravo Battalion HQ of SWAPO was stationed north, and the HQ of the important Moscow Battalion northeast, of Cuvelai. The eastern HQ of SWAPO was situated east of Cuvelai. The 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion HQ, stationed between Tchamutete and Cuvelai, had to protect the northern HQ of SWAPO.<sup>14</sup> Cuvelai’s eastern front was covered by field artillery and also by dual-purpose anti-aircraft guns which, when used in a ground-defence role, inflicted heavy casualties on security force attackers on at least one occasion.<sup>15</sup>

The initial plan was to attack Cuvelai from the south-east. Accordingly the combat group proceeded to Mongua, situated about 100 km north of the border between Angola and South West Africa, where they spent the night in temporary bases. However, the south-eastern attack was not carried out

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11 RS Lord, “Operation Askari (a sub-commander’s retrospective view of the operation)”, *Militaria* 22/4, 1992, pp. 5-6.

12 RS Lord, “Operation Askari (a sub-commander’s retrospective view of the operation)”, *Militaria* 22/4, 1992, pp. 7-8.

13 ARMR, Potchefstroom, File 159: *Seinberg*, 82 *Gemeganiseerde Brigade Veggroep Delta/Sektor 10, Pers/254/Des 83*.

14 *Die Suidwester*, 20 Januarie 1984, p. 5.

15 *The Cape Times*, 30 January 1984, p. 9.

immediately, because the combat group received an order from Brigadier J. Joubert to rescue a small combat group west of the Kunene River.<sup>16</sup>

After the successful rescue mission the intimidation phase (approximately 26 to 30 December 1983) continued from the west side of Cuvelai. Patrols were regularly sent out and as soon as they came within a certain distance of Cuvelai, the artillery guns and mortars roared from Cuvelai. Later it was established that the enemy had fired at previously marked targets.

The so-called battle-broadcast speaker was used in an attempt to unnerve the enemy to such a degree that they would flee. Because of the exceptionally flat territory, sound travelled for kilometres, particularly at night. Powerful sound equipment was mounted on a vehicle and then one of the soldiers who could speak Portuguese shouted out intimidating South African propaganda. Every hour a round of harassing fire was shot in the direction of Cuvelai to keep the enemy from sleeping. The threatening tactics had no effect, though, and as Combat Group Delta had to move off course in any event to rescue the small combat group, it was decided to attack Cuvelai from the north-east and thereby also to cut off the northern escape route. However, this plan was doomed right from the beginning, because the Cuvelai River, which was in flood, formed a natural barrier between the attack force and the enemy's main posts.<sup>17</sup> Commandant Greyling's objections against the deviation from the original plan of attack were dismissed by the headquarters in Oshivello, who insisted that the attack should be launched from the north-east.<sup>18</sup> This short-sightedness would cost the headquarters dearly.<sup>19</sup>

On the 27 and 28 December two Impalas and four Canberras launched a massive air strike on Cuvelai and vicinity: 900 Alpha bombs, as well as 10 x 120 kg, 65 x 250 kg and 4 x 460 kg bombs were dropped with an impressive 90% coverage of the target.<sup>20</sup>

The first onslaught on Cuvelai began on 31 December 1983. All the side streams of the river were running and the vehicles got stuck in almost every one of them. During the salvage operations two kinetic ropes broke, because the vehicles could not be pulled out slowly, but rather by a "rush

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16 Interview, GJJ Oosthuizen/SG Greyling and WH van Zyl, 11 December 1999; WH van Zyl, 5 May 2001.

17 Interview, GJJ Oosthuizen/SG Greyling, HA Kallmeyer, 11 December 1999.

18 Interview, GJJ Oosthuizen/SG Greyling, 11 December 1999.

19 ARMIR, Potchefstroom, File 155: *Dagboek, Bravo Kompanjie, 8 Desember 83 tot 14 Januarie 84*, pp. 6-7.

20 RS Lord, "Operation Askari (a sub-commander's retrospective view of the operation)", *Militaria* 22/4, 1992, p. 8.

and pull” technique. Due to the crisis with the stuck vehicles the first attack, which should have started at dawn, could only begin at about 09:00. Commandant Faan Greyling wanted to postpone the attack because of the delay, but headquarters stubbornly refused.<sup>21</sup>

During the march toward the enemy the South Africans, who were not visible directly from the Cuvelai base, were met by intense 23 mm firing. One of the commanders of combat team 30 was so unnerved by the attack that the exceptionally skilful Lieutenant Dirk du Plessis had to take command of two armoured vehicle teams simultaneously. During the attack the officer in command of the mortar section, Second Lieutenant P.M. Liebenberg, lifted the mortar firing by 50 metre leaps, but shortly after the beginning of the attack, the mortars suddenly became quiet. A 23 mm mortar of the enemy hit the tower of Liebenberg’s Ratel, fatally injuring him. Because of this incident, and due to the terrain with felled trees over which they had to move most probably had been mined, Commandant Greyling gave orders that they should fall back about 50 to 100 metres. The standing doctrine for armoured vehicles was to retreat orderly in a line, but what followed on the order was chaos. The vehicles moved in total disorder past the combat group headquarters. Commandant Faan Greyling somehow managed to restore calm and thereafter they moved to an assembly point beyond the firing range of the enemy posts.

The process of salvaging stuck vehicles was repeated during their retreat journey. In addition, headquarters gave the order that Cuvelai should be attacked immediately via the northern white road. Commandant Greyling flatly refused to do this and argued that proper planning and reconnaissance were needed first. The white road gave access to a narrow bridge and the Cuvelai base, but only one vehicle at a time could move across the bridge. An attack from that direction would be suicide, because the enemy would easily be able to counter the attack.<sup>22</sup>

The FAPLA/SWAPO/Cuban contingent at Cuvelai ceased fire during the South Africans’ retreat and they did not use the opportunity to wipe out the South Africans, who were struggling for hours to rescue vehicles from the

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21 Interview, GJJ Oosthuizen/HA Kallmeyer, WH van Zyl, SG Greyling, 11 December 1999; WH van Zyl, 5 May 2001.

22 ARMR, Potchefstroom, File 199: *Seinberigvorm, Veggroep Delta/Sektor 10, 31 Desember 1983*; ARMR, Potchefstroom, File 155: *Seinberigte, Veggroep Delta, reeksnommer 1758, 31 Desember 1983*; Interview, GJJ Oosthuizen/HA Kallmeyer, SG Greyling, WH van Zyl, 11 December 1999.



muddy streams. It was already past midnight when the last vehicles, under command of Major Kallmeyer, reached the camp site, about 12 km north-west of Cuvelai.<sup>23</sup>

After the botched first attack the groups (mainly two sections) from Regiment Groot Karoo absolutely refused to participate in any further combat. The feeling among the men was that they were always first in the line of fire during an attack and that the attacks were planned in such a way that they were being used as cannon fodder. Major Kallmeyer had the difficult task of convincing the demoralised soldiers of the contrary. Kallmeyer, supported by his enthusiastic armoured vehicle crew, eventually managed to persuade the foot-soldiers to continue fighting, but on condition that they received proper orders and were not forced to leave the relative safety of the vehicles prematurely. Kallmeyer also decided to side-step the lieutenants from Regiment Groot Karoo, who no longer had the complete trust of their men, by personally and simultaneously giving orders to the whole combat team.<sup>24</sup>

Commandant E. van Lill, officer in command of 61 Mechanised Brigade, was put in charge of the next onslaught on Cuvelai. During the first and unsuccessful attack on Cuvelai, Van Lill and his men tried in vain to intimidate Cahama. They were added to Combat Group Delta as reinforcements. This time it was wisely decided to attack Cuvelai from the south-east and the men moved through the Cuvelai River. The attack, which would have taken place on 3 January 1984 from the south-eastern side, was postponed until the next day, though, because the combat teams could not reach the marching-off lines in time. Commandant Van Lill and his group, for instance, got hopelessly lost and ended up more or less 16 km north of their planned marching-off line. Van Lill therefore gave orders that the various groups had to retreat beyond the firing range of Cuvelai and assume temporary bases.<sup>25</sup>

The second attack was co-ordinated with an effective air attack. Ten Impalas and four Canberras dropped 60 x 120 kg, 50 x 250 kg, 2x 450 kg and 600 Alpha bombs. The ground forces started their advance round about 08:00 on 4 January 1984, by 14:00 the enemy positions had already been conquered and by 18:00 the last communist forces (FAPLA's 11<sup>th</sup> Brigade, a 2 600-man mechanized infantry formation, two Cuban Battalions and SWAPO elements) had fled the town. On

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23 Interview, GJJ Oosthuizen/SG Greyling, HA Kallmeyer, 11 December 1999; WH van Zyl, 5 May 2001.

24 Interview, GJJ Oosthuizen/HA Kallmeyer, SG Greyling, 11 December 1999.

25 Interview, GJJ Oosthuizen/WH van Zyl, HA Kallmeyer, SW van der Merwe, 11 December 1999; JM Venter, 5 May 2001; M Norval, *Death in the desert: the Namibian tragedy*, p. 176.

the 5 January 1984 Cuvelai was firmly in the hands of the South African forces. In the attack one Ratel of 61 Mechanic Battalion was hit by an enemy RPG, slightly injuring one man. A second Ratel, however, was hit by tank fire and four men of 61 Mechanised Battalion were killed. RMR's losses were restricted to the hatch of one vehicle, which was hit by an enemy 14,5 mm (a machine gun mounted on a vehicle), but nobody was injured in the incident.

The large number of mines in the area complicated the following mop-up and securing operation. Members of the Engineer Corps therefore secured the territory before the clean-up was undertaken in all earnest.<sup>26</sup> 21 members (among them six from 61 Mechanised Battalion) of the SADF and the SWATF in total were killed during Operation Askari. The enemy suffered about 324 fatalities and an unknown number was injured.<sup>27</sup>

In the large-scale mop-up operation, which lasted until 9 January 1984, a large number of weapons, ammunition and vehicles worth millions of rands and of Russian origin were seized.<sup>28</sup> Much was made in particular of the advanced SAM 9 system that had been seized, a complete mobile ground-to-air missile system.<sup>29</sup> Excited claims by the SADF that it was the first time for this system to fall into Western hands was not true at all. As a matter of fact, it was already known to such an extent in the West that when it was put on show, it did not receive much attention from foreign defence authorities. The Soviets had some time ago already introduced the Sam 13 system, with a more efficient warhead than the Sam 9, a greater range and better radar control.<sup>30</sup>

By 21:00 on 14 January 1984 the last vehicles arrived from Angola in Oshivello, South West Africa.<sup>31</sup>

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26 ARMR, Potchefstroom, File 52: *Seinberigvorms, Veggroep 3, [A(?)-Squadron], reeksnommers 344-369*; ARMR, Potchefstroom, File 63: *Uniform*, no. 100, 16 January 1984; P.H.R. Snyman, *Beeld van die SWA gebiedsmag*, p. 21; Interview, GJJ Oosthuizen/SG Greyling, HA Kallmeyer, 11 December 1999; M Norval, *Death in the desert: the Namibian tragedy*, p. 178; RS Lord, "Operation Askari (a sub-commander's retrospective view of the operation)", *Militaria* 22/4, 1992, p. 8; *The Cape Times*, 30 January 1984, p. 9; S. du Preez, *Avontuur in Angola: Die verhaal van Suid-Afrika se soldate in Angola, 1975-1976* (Van Schaik, Pretoria, 1989), pp. 229-230.

27 *Pretoria News*, 16 January 1984, p. 8; *Sunday Tribune*, 15 January 1984, p. 3; *Die Burger*, 14 Januarie 1984, p. 1; *Zuid-Afrika*, Januarie 1984, p. 3; *Beeld*, 9 Januarie 1984, p. 1.

28 *Sunday Express*, 15 January 1984, p. 1; *Rapport*, 15 Januarie 1984, p. 1; *Zuid-Afrika*, Januarie 1984, p. 3; *Die Transvaler*, 14 Januarie 1984, p. 1; *Die Republikein*, 16 Januarie 1984, p. 4; M. Norval, *Death in the desert: the Namibian tragedy* (Washington, 1989), p. 181.

29 *Sunday Times*, 29 January 1984, p. 1; *Rapport*, 29 Januarie 1984, p. 1; *The Citizen*, 30 January 1984, p. 12; *Sunday Express*, 29 January 1984, p. 4; *Die Republikein*, 30 Januarie 1984, p. 3; *Rand Daily Mail*, 30 January 1984, p. 2; *Sunday Tribune*, 29 January 1984, p. 1; *Die Burger*, 30 Januarie 1984, p. 3; *The Argus*, 30 January 1984, p. 5; *The Star*, 31 January 1984, p. 1; *Beeld*, 31 Januarie 1984, p. 20.

30 *Rand Daily Mail*, 1 February 1984, p. 5.

31 ARMR, Potchefstroom, File 155: *Oorlogsdagboek, Veggroep D, 140700B tot 141900B Jan 84*.

## Conclusion

The SADF announced widely in the media that Operation Askari had been a great success, as SWAPO's control and information headquarters as well as its logistical structure had been destroyed and their plan of attack as well as the planned infiltration during the rainy season had consequently been totally derailed.<sup>32</sup> Glowing newspaper headlines such as "SA returns from Angola in triumph" en "Journey of victory for SA from Angola" overstated the case by focusing only on the second attack on Cuvelai.<sup>33</sup> However, the overall objective of Operation Askari, namely to hamstring any SWAPO infiltration to the south, could not be realised. In 1984, after Operation Askari, 555 more Plan soldiers were killed by the SADF. It was an indication that although SWAPO suffered heavy losses, the pattern of the insurgency war continued. The South Africans had therefore failed to achieve the main aim of Operation Askari. The offensive action against the FAPLA strongholds of Cahama and Mulondo was a dismal failure, and in the case of Cuvelai the South Africans could only manage to conquer it during a second attempt. FAPLA could rightfully boast that they had lost Cuvelai but had won the battles for Cahama and Mulondo.<sup>34</sup>

Operation Askari can be regarded as a watershed event in the so-called "bush war". Militarily the fight had taken on a new dimension: it had changed from guerrilla warfare in small groups to a conventional war with forces armed with sophisticated Russian weaponry.<sup>35</sup> In *The Argus* a concerned journalist reported as follows on this new dimension: "If anything, the military conundrum appears to be more intractable and ominous, since by all accounts Angolan and Cuban forces have now joined the battle."<sup>36</sup> Operation Askari exposed the active participation of Russians in a combat role and there were ominous signs that the Angolan war had the potential of becoming "an international cauldron rather than a relatively forgotten bush war."<sup>37</sup>

This point of view concerning the Russian threat was emphasised in many of the foremost South African newspapers and voices went up in favour of a

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32 *Rapport*, 15 Januarie 1984, p. 1; *Die Vaderland*, 14 Januarie 1984, p. 1; *Die Transvaler*, 14 Januarie 1984, p. 1; *Evening Post*, 16 January 1984, p. 6.

33 *Rapport*, 14 Januarie 1984, p. 1; *Die Vaderland*, 14 Januarie 1984, p. 1.

34 RS Lord, "Operation Askari (a sub-commander's retrospective view of the operation)", *Militaria* 22/4, 1992, p. 10.

35 *Oosterlig*, 18 April 1984, p. 4.

36 *The Argus*, 16 January 1984, p. 12.

37 *Sunday Times*, 15 January 1984, p. 1.

diplomatic solution rather than one through the barrel of a gun.<sup>38</sup> Thus for example *The Argus* pleaded for a cessation of all hostilities and concluded: “For the moment and perhaps for a long time ahead the South Africans have achieved a position favourable to themselves at a fairly small cost. Need fate be tempted further?”<sup>39</sup> *The Cape Times* in this regard also made a moving plea: Why fight for the sake of fighting? The thing to do is get out while the going is still good.”<sup>40</sup> An official Soviet announcement in January 1984 that Moscow will increase aid to Angola to strengthen the nation’s “defences, independence and territorial integrity” aggravated the Russian phobia even further.<sup>41</sup>

In addition, Operation Askari to a very large extent had alienated the West even further from South Africa.<sup>42</sup> The resolution by the UN Security Council with 13 votes against none (the USA and Britain abstained) to condemn South Africa for its aggression in Angola was tangible proof of this.<sup>43</sup>

The South Africans claimed that the most important consequence of Operation Askari was that Angola had been forced to the conference table in Lusaka.<sup>44</sup> However, the flipside of the coin is also true, as the effective Russian and Cuban threat in the form of manpower and sophisticated weaponry had also forced the South Africans to realise the sense of negotiations.

Brigadier Lord emphasised “the limited success” of Operation Askari but concluded “...that as an operation against SWAPO, Askari produced results that effectively eliminated SWAPO PLAN as a major element in the military struggle. Although the organisation still existed, their military efforts had lost potential and were easily countered. Although we required a large economic outlay to maintain this status quo, they realised and we realised that they could not beat us militarily. In this aspect Askari was successful.”<sup>45</sup>

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38 *Die Transvaler*, 31 Januarie 1984, p. 14; *The Citizen*, 14 January 1984, p. 6; *Rand Daily Mail*, 31 January 1984, p. 2; *Die Vaderland*, 31 Januarie 1984, p. 1; *Die Burger*, 31 Januarie 1984, p. 12; *Die Burger*, 18 Januarie 1984, p. 14.

39 *The Natal Witness*, 18 Januarie 1984, p. 12.

40 *The Cape Times*, 17 January 1984, p. 14.

41 *Newsweek*, 23 January 1984, p. 23.

42 *The Daily News*, 16 January 1984, p. 1.

43 *Beeld*, 9 Januarie 1984, p. 2; *Die Volksblad*, 12 Januarie 1984, p. 1; *The Windhoek Advertiser*, 12 Januarie 1984, p. 2; *Newsweek*, 23 Januarie 1984, p. 23.

44 CJ Nöthling, “Military chronicle of South West Africa (1915-1988), *South African Defence Force Review*, 1989; p. 255; CJ Nöthling, “Kort kroniek van militêre operasies en optredes in Suidwes-Afrika en Angola (1914-1988)”; *Militaria*, vol. 19/2, 1989, p. 11; S du Preez, *Avontuur in Angola: Die verhaal van Suid-Afrika se soldate in Angola, 1975-1976*, p. 230.

45 RS Lord, “Operation Askari (a sub-commander’s retrospective view of the operation)”, *Militaria* 22/4, 1992, p.10.